



Q&A with Ashlin Ahlip of *Tangerine*:

Hand-made Tote Bags and Accessories

Ash Ahlip keeps his long, black hair tied back while he sits at his sewing machine in the main reception area of *Island Yoga*.

— By Amie Watson

The man behind the Aruban brand *Tangerine* is lining up a pattern he cut at home for a burgundy tote with a turquoise strap. He spends a few days a week here at his sewing station, where he's both on display for anyone who stops by for some *vinyasa* flow – great marketing for his canvas yoga mat bags – and gets to hang out with his friend Dennis, the studio's owner.

His brand was never meant to be related to the yoga industry, despite its clean, minimalist design. "It just happened that way," he says. "Most people who do yoga are positive, so it's nice to be around people who just want to be happy."

For seven years, he worked in retail, managing *Bula*, the surf shop in Oranjestad, but now his perfect day involves a cup of coffee and his sewing station at *Island Yoga*. The best part is he can take a real lunch break – *saoto* soup with friends at *Indo Restaurant* next door, fresh juices and vegetarian fare at *Nourish Café* in the garden behind the studio, or Chinese at *Hung Paradise* in Oranjestad – before coming leisurely back to work ("If you can call it work," he says, smiling).

Another big life shift involved exchanging surfing for sailing. "I changed to big boy toys,"

he jokes. "I'm working on my boat a lot, so I'm going to be doing a lot of sailing around here."

His practiced hands rarely stray from his work while he tells me about his nautically-inspired designs, his business and the growing art scene on Aruba.

Where are you from?

I'm from Aruba originally, born and raised. Tried to move away two times. Didn't work, so I'm staying.

How did you start making bags?

Tangerine is an interpretation of my family's craft. My family owns and operates the oldest upholstery shop in Aruba, but my father didn't want me to do anything related to upholstery because he hated it as a kid. Back in 2010, I asked my grandma to teach me to make pants.

A year later, I went to Wooden Boat School in Maine and took a course in canvas sewing. Originally, I wanted to sew traditional hand-made sails, but I found the traditional design for nautical bags and I added my own flavor to it – some of the colors and patterns. I think in 2018, I'll be coming out with a big collection based on traditional Spanish tiles that were a big influence on Aruba in the early 1900s.

Most of your original bags feature a two-color design with an exterior strap, but you recently started using Spanish tile patterns. What inspired the change?

The print comes from a photo of the tile floor of a house downtown in Rancho, Oranjestad. My photographer friend Cado did a whole research on locally-made tiles, went to houses and broke down walls to find samples.



Photography: Kenneth Thoenen

Why did you transition from the surf shop to making bags full time?

I think when you get to your late twenties and thirties, you start to focus on what you want. I always told myself I'd retire at 30. This is my way of retiring. For me, having free time for yourself, that's success.

Your bags don't have 'Aruba' printed on them. Do you make them for locals or visitors?

I think in order for you to create a market for yourself, locals need to like it first. That will help me grow as a business, not just on the island but internationally.

What does your 'We the Beach People' slogan mean to you?

It's a feeling. You look at the phrase and you feel like you're either a part of it or you're not. I consider myself to be a Caribbean person. Any island I go to I basically feel at home.

Do you want *Tangerine* to grow?

I'm torn. Let's say you see my bags in Amsterdam or New York, you know that someone actually came to Aruba and got them here, not online. If I had an international company, though, I'd make more money, but I don't see that as making me a better person. I chose to let go of a lot of material goods, like my really nice apartment on the beach. Now I pay a quarter of the rent. That gives me freedom.

You sell tote bags, yoga bags, Dopp Kits (toiletry bags) and pouches. Anything else?

Passport holders. When you go through metal detectors, you just open this up and put your watch in it, your boarding pass, your phone. Everything's nice and safe. It even fits in your pocket. Before you have one you don't think you need it, but once you do, you feel it completely.

***Korteweg* is a local pop-up art event that you co-founded with your friend Cado in 2014. It only happens a couple times a year. What's its goal?**

We're trying to bring a more innovative version of culture. To hear about our upcoming events, you can message the *Korteweg* Facebook page.

Who are some other artists in Aruba that people should hear about?

Cado for sure. And I'd consider Paul Wong one of the biggest artists in Aruba. He's an airbrush artist. In the early '90s, he had a t-shirt brand called *Isla*. He was even commissioned to go to Miami and California to do art pieces on motorcycles and cars.

How much do your bags cost?

The smallest pouches that are like wallets are around 15 USD. The bags are 55 to 120 USD. My main bags sell for 85 USD.

Where can people buy them?

At *Bula Surf Shop*, *Cosecha*, *Island Yoga* and the *Korteweg* pop-up arts and crafts markets. ■

TANGERINE
www.arubahandmade.com